

OPENINGSSPEECH INTERREG HILDE VAUTMANS  
16 NOVEMBER 2021, 13U30

Dear ladies and gentlemen,

I am very happy to welcome you at this event “Improving Biodiversity Governance”, hosted by the Interreg BioGov project on Biodiversity Governance.

As a member of the Committee on Agriculture and Rural Development in the European Parliament and as president of the MEPs for Wildlife Group, I attach great importance to our biodiversity. Plants and animals are very important to many aspects of our daily lives and contribute to our economic, cultural and social wellbeing.

But today, the world is facing a biodiversity crisis with plant and animal species disappearing at a very fast pace, leading to a drastic reduction in biodiversity mainly caused by human activities. We have the responsibility to reverse this tendency and to protect all sorts of plants and animals, and address all forms of threats to them.

The EU Biodiversity Strategy 2030 is an ambitious agreement to try to stop this biodiversity loss in Europe by protecting and restoring nature. The Strategy also enables change through new forms of decision-making. That is what the so-called ‘biodiversity governance’ framework is about. This new form of governance will be crucial if we want to achieve our ambitious objectives.

For us, as Renew Europe, it is very clear: we can only achieve effective climate resilient policies if all stakeholders combine forces. Interreg Europe realizes the importance of working together and sharing ideas, and has therefore put strong local cooperation, coordination and knowledge sharing between the various stakeholders at the core of their projects. That is why this project and organisation is so important. By supporting regional and local governments across Europe and facilitating stakeholder cooperation, BioGov is contributing to a more coherent biodiversity policy.

Let me illustrate this by an example from my own country, Belgium. BioGov supported a local project in 2018 with as aim to make the valley of the Gulp, a river that runs through Voeren, climate proof. BioGov contributed to this project by setting up a process to reconcile the differences in laws and policies

between the different regions in Belgium. On a voluntary basis, local farmers and other actors went in dialogue and have boosted biodiversity by working together with local governmental and non-governmental organizations to tackle problems that the region is increasingly struggling with such as erosion, drought and flooding.

This piloting case is inspiring and worth looking into. First of all, it is encouraging that local farmers were involved in policymaking. Secondly, the bottom-up approach can easily be taken over to similar projects that aim to improve regional biodiversity across Europe. The input of the bottom-up project has led to the realization of a tailor-made instrument for the refunding of works by farmers and landowners that improve the biodiversity in the region.

Interreg had similar projects in the Netherlands, Sweden and Spain and all met with the same enthusiasm. This way of working can help us in Europe to fight together against the loss of biodiversity and is the way we should do it in the future. By bringing together the different stakeholders to share their opinions, they can harmonize their objectives and try to build consensus. This can give the stakeholders a feeling of ownership, which could enhance the effectiveness of a certain policy because they are more motivated to contribute to a solution.

It is clear that with its Biodiversity Strategy for 2030, the EU has the powers and ambition to take the lead in this fight and to influence the rest of the world. But we cannot do this without the cooperation from local stakeholders, such as farmers. We need to give them a voice and let them participate in the process. This is the only way to motivate everyone to fight this battle together and to find suitable solutions adapted to the needs in the region. And that's exactly what this project stands for.

I am looking forward hearing BioGov's key messages, the insights from the other speakers and the recommendations of the panel.

Thank you and enjoy the event.